DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 235 484 CS 207 517

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TITLE The Frontier Newspaper Community: A Computer Profile.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (66th, Corvallis, OR, August 6-9, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Characteristics; Community Size; Demography; *Economics; *Journalism; Local History; Media Research; *Newspapers; *Rural Development; Rural Environment; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Frontier Communities; *Journalism History

ABSTRACT

Relying on Daniel Boorstin's argument that the newspaper was at least one of the first institutions in a frontier community, a study examined the 1880 United States Census of eight western territories to determine the number of newspapers and the ratio of newspapers to population in frontier counties. Three groups were examined: counties that had at least one newspaper, counties with one or more relatively new (two years old or less) newspapers, and counties that had at least one newspaper that was more than two years old. Figures suggested that population was important to a newspaper, with old newspaper counties offering a larger population base than was found in new newspaper counties, but that the composition of that population made little difference. The relative wealth of a county, however, was important, with the old newspaper counties being clearly richer than those where newspapers were a recent arrival. The data suggest that when their newspapers were established, these counties already had solid population bases for their time and place. Another interesting point was that more than half of the 165 counties in the territories did not have newspapers. Evidence shows that, after considering total population, economics of a county were more significant than demographics in terms of newspaper establishment. (HOD)

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THE FRONTIER NEWSPAPER COMMUNITY:

A COMPUTER PROFILE

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Presented to the History Divsion
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Annual Convention
Corvallis, Oregon August 1983

CS 207 517

ABSTRACT

THE FRONTIER NEWSPAPER COMMUNITY: A COMPUTER PROFILE

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U.S. Census data provide the basis for describing the demographic and economic conditions existing in frontier newspaper counties in eight western territories in 1880, and for comparing counties with well established newspapers (defined as two or more years old) with counties in which newspapers were recent arrivals (less than two years old). The latter comparisons showed that, after considering total population, economics of a county were more significant than demographics in terms of newspaper establishment.

Presented to the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Convention, Corvallis, Oregon, August 1983.

THE FRONTIER NEWSPAPER COMMUNITY: A COMPUTER PROFILE

As historians, we concern ourselves primarily with discrete happenings, but on occasion we find it useful to be able to discuss historical events in terms of ages or eras, trends, or at least tendencies for the historical movement to go in a particular direction. We like to be able to group the people and events we study, and we apply labels, such as the Penny Press, the Yellow Press, the abolitionist editors.

When we combine a number of elements under one label we suggest that the various components of the group share similar characteristics, and sometimes we draw broad conclusions on the basis of a small sample of people or events which may not be representative of the larger whole. Such is the case with some of Daniel Boorstin's claims regarding the booster press of frontier America, in particular, his statement that the western newspaper "had to call into being the very population it would serve."[1]

Boorstin offers colorful examples to make his point but, given

the great number of communities throughout the various and diverse parts of the frontier, his cases are relatively few and we do not know how representative they are. History and historians tend to focus on the unique and exotic and therefore interesting, rather the mundane and presumably not so interesting, features of the past, but interestingness does not necessarily equal representativeness. Could it be useful, therefore, to historians to be able to find representative cases in order to be somewhat more precise in determining what is "typical" in the pages of history? This paper is based on the assumption that the answer to that question is "yes," and that one place to start in this endeavor is to use quantitative methods that can help describe the average or typical component.

The idea of using quantitative measurements to probe journalism history is, of course, not new. Carolyn Stewart Dyer[2] and David Nord[3] are among the pioneers in the use of quantitative methods for journalism history. However, despite their efforts, a great deal of work remains if journalism historians are to take advantage both of the techniques available and of the data that can be culled from the archives. While quantification has its limitations, we have only begun to tap its resources and this paper is an example of another way in which quantitative material can be used. As such, it is perhaps more exploratory than profound, and, as will be noted at the end of the paper, there are a number of facets of the material yet to be analyzed. But it is worth sharing both the approach and the tentative conclusions.

This paper looks at the frontier period in journalism history, taking as its starting point Boorstin's argument that the newspaper was the first, or at least one of the first, institutions in a frontier community. The notion has been challenged by Dyer and Roy Atwood[4] who found an average of seven years in Wisconsin and six in Iowa, respectively, between the establishment of a post office and the start of the first newspaper in towns on those midwestern frontiers and by Cloud who found a six-year lag in Washington Territory in the Pacific Northwest.[5]

Post office dates are helpful starting points, but by using a more extensive source of measurement, the published United States Census, it is possible to develop a profile of the "typical" frontier newspaper community, which gives us an even stronger basis for assessing Boorstin's argument and, as we shall see, for deciding that he has exaggerated the primitive circumstances under which most frontier newspapers were established. From the various components of population and community wealth, we can also learn something about the social and economic climate in which the frontier press developed.

B. METHOD

The basis for this profile is the published United States Census for the year 1880. 1880 was used for several reasons: It was the last census year before the census bureau decreed the demise of the frontier;[6] it was a year in which the scope of the census "was increased to encyclopedic proportions,"[7] so that

there was a considerable amount of information, at least by 19th century standards. It was the year in which there was particular interest in the newspaper press, as evidenced by the special report included in the census.[8] It was also a census in which the United States still had a number of frontier territories; by 1890 there were only three.[9]

In 1880 the United States had eight territories that could be considered "frontier": Arizona, Dakota, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Washington, Wyoming and Utah. (The District of Columbia was also a territory.) These were chosen for study because territorial status carried with it a stronger frontier image than statehood; after all, a territory had few of the institutions that go with civilization, such as penitentiaries, mental hospitals, universities, etc. With statehood came more population, more printing business, and therefore more reason to have a newspaper. The distinctions between the political entities of state and territory were many; hence the decision to treat them separately and to focus here on the territories.[10]

As noted, published census data provided the basis for the study. Use of the census is, however, fraught with hazards. For example, sometimes local census units neglected to submit returns to territorial or federal auditors and in the relatively isolated west, procedures were not always followed. It was clear in Washington Territory, for example, that some enumerators, when counting the married and unmarried members of the population, included only those of marriageable age, while other enumerators counted everyone. Assessment procedures also varied within one

territory, so the problems can only be compounded when examining a wide geographical area.[11] It is likely that the zeal with which white census takers sought to enumerate their Indian brothers and sisters varied greatly from territory to territory in 1880, so tnat in some units the figures indicating the proportion of white to nonwhite were distorted. The timing of the census and dependence on the ability of respondents to recall deaths, etc. created further problems. Despite these drawbacks, census data remains useful if considered a guide, rather than the final answer to historical questions.[12]

Another hazard of using census data, or any other quantified source, should be noted here. In quantifying we tend to deal with averages which allow us to make generalizations over a large area with some confidence. This is one of the virtues of quantification. But averages can also distort. As will be seen, the frontier communities under study range from populations of a few hundred to tens of thousands. When dealing with such extremes, the averages that result may not be reflections of any reality. Sometimes statisticians disregard extremes; sometimes grouping data results in a more reasonable picture. In any case, I have tried to account for such hazards and warn where they occur.

Counties, rather than towns, were selected as the units for study. Territorial censuses of towns apparently were not fully reported, probably because many of them were so small; use of towns would, therefore, provide a small data base. Counties, on the other hand, were generally designated, if not formally

organized, in all territories by 1880, and they provided a unit that was basic, at least in a political context, from one territory to the next. In addition, it makes sense to consider counties because most newspapers served at least that geographical area: few limited themselves to their city limits.

Still another problem, relevant to the particular focus of this study on the establishment of newspapers in a county, was that newspapers rarely were conveniently started in census years. Nevertheless, the data have been organized to make best use of their ability to lead to conclusions relevant to the conditions under which newspapers were started.

The basic measurement used was the frequency of an occurrence, expressed in actual values and/or in percentages. Three groups were examined in this way. One group consisted of all the counties with newspapers in all eight territories. The second was counties with one or more relatively new newspapers, those two years old or less. The third group contained counties that had at least one newspaper that was more than two years old. In addition to the descriptive statistics on new and old newspaper counties, comparisons based on chi-square analysis indicate where differences between the two groups are statistically significant.

FINDINGS: In the eight territories examined, there were 165 counties: of these not quite half, 47 percent, had at least one weekly newspaper, and it is these 78 counties, with which the following statistics are concerned. Table 1 shows the averages for all counties with newspapers for a number of variables seen as

relevant to newspaper establishment.

Of the 78 counties with newspapers, 47 percent of them had only one weekly, 46 percent had two to four weeklies, and the remaining 6 percent had five or more (one had 10 weeklies). Twenty-three percent also had at least one daily newspaper, with the number of dailies ranging as high as four.

In 1880 the average age of the newspapers was 6.8 years, but 24 percent of them were a year or less old, and 15 percent were only two years old, so that nearly 40 percent of all newspaper counties were relatively recent beneficiaries of the press. For purposes of this analysis, these were classified as "new" newspaper counties.

The mean population of the newspaper counties was 5,508 but the range was great: from 799 to 31,977. Thirty percent fell between 4,000 and 7,000 (the average, plus or minus about 1,500) and 80 percent of the counties were between 1,500 and 10,000.

Obviously, population -- a market -- is a basic requirement for any publication, but in assessing today's newspaper markets, analysts look for more than mere numbers of people.[13] They are concerned about potential readership which includes such things as the ability to read and the stability of the clientele, factors that may well have concerned prospective frontier publishers. Unfortunately, the published 1880 census figures do not include county literacy rates, but they do include territorial rates. These range from a low 2.2 percent of the adult population reported as "unable to write" in Montana, to a high 62.1 percent in Spanish-speaking New Mexico, for an average over all eight

territories of 12.7 unable to write. It is probable that these people were also unable to read well enough to be interested in buying a newspaper.

There are other ways to use census data to assess the potential readership. For example, frontier population counts included Indians and Chinese, who were unlikely to figure highly in local newspaper readership. When they are discounted, whites, the most likely readers, accounted for more than 90 percent of the population in more than three-quarters of the newspaper counties. However, many of these whites were immigrants, whose ability with the English language may have precluded their reading a local newspaper. After accounting for this group, we find that the newspaper counties averaged 67 percent white, nativeborn. This suggests that the true figure of people able to read well enough to handle the newspaper probably lay somewhere between 67 percent and 90 percent on the average through the eight territories.[14]

The literacy figures, however, illustrate one of the problems of using averages. The high rate in New Mexico distorts the figures for the other territories, most of which were close to one another as well as closer to a seven-territory average of 5.6 percent than to the 12.7 for all territories. (The fact that the Spanish-speaking people in New Mexico were white, nativeborn complicates our corroborative calculations, as well.)

Stability is another important measure of potential success for a newspaper. It is well established that those who "put down roots" are better prospects for newspaper readership.[15] One measure of stability in a population is the proportion of women in

a community, on the theory that the family man, with wife and children to consider, is less likely to throw his belongings in a bag and move on in his search for green pastures.[14] To be sure, not all women in a county were wives, particularly in the mining camps; their numbers were, nevertheless, a useful measure and the figures show that on the average, women comprised 37 percent of the newspaper county population, with 80 percent of the counties having at least 30 percent of their number female.

Another possible measure of stability is the number and proportion of farms that are owned, as opposed to rented, by the people who live on them. In the territories in 1880, the newspaper counties averaged 385 farms, of which 94 percent were owned by the people who ran them.

The industrial activity of a community was, to a degree, another measure of stability. Setting up a plant took effort and money and most "industrialists" were not likely to abandon their properties, although they were often willing, as were the farm owners, to accept any reasonable offer. Of course, industries dependent on mining might find themselves suddenly without a resource if an area was worked out or a rich strike in another territory drew miners away. In any case, the newspaper counties boasted an average of 16 industrial establishments, although 15 percent had none and half of them had 10 or fewer plants.

Wealth of a community is an important consideration to a prospective publisher who wants to be sure of support for his enterprise. Modern analysts make much of socio-economic status, noting that newspaper subscribers have higher incomes than

non-subscribers.

The census is relatively rich in the financial data it provides. For example, the 385 farms averaged $3,675 in value, and produced an average of $720 in crops, etc. each year. The manufacturing establishments employed an average of 64 people (more than half, however, had 26 or fewer), and paid them an average of $328 each. They produced goods averaging $8,079 per manufacturer.

The average assessed valuation per newspaper county was $1,405,041 and per capita assessed value averaged $280.85. An arbitrary measure of prosperity, incorporating an average of a number of financial indicators, gave the newspaper counties a prosperity rating of .94.[17]

Potential publishers look for people who can read who are prosperous enough to support a newspaper. They also look for prospects for growth. From 1870 to 1880 newspaper counties had gained an average of 342 people a year.

These figures become more interesting when they are divided into two components: counties with new newspapers (those two or less years old) and counties with old newspapers (more than two years old). Thirty-one counties fell into the first category, which was 40 percent of the counties with newspapers, and 19 percent of all 165 counties surveyed. Although most counties had a single weekly started during the two-year period, one of these new newspaper counties had a daily newspaper, nine had two weekly newspapers, one had three and another had four. Forty-seven counties (60 percent of the newspaper counties and 28 percent of

all territory counties) were old newspaper counties. This group included 17 counties with daily newspapers; one county had four dailies. Each had at least one weekly, 30 had two or more, including one that had 10 weekly newspapers.

Generally, as Table 2 shows, new newspaper counties were substantially poorer than old newspaper counties. For example, average population in the new newspaper counties was 3,592, only slightly more than half the population for old newspaper counties. The new newspaper counties had a lower per capita assessed valuation than old counties -- $256 to $297 -- and paid about a third as much in taxes -- $13,143 to $40,536.

The figures also show that counties with well established newspapers (our "old" counties) had a higher level of industrial activity than new counties. New newspaper counties had only about a third as many manufacturers as the old counties had -- 6.5 to 22, respectively, sales per manufacturer were less than half -- $4,798 to $10,243, and the amount of wages paid per manufacturing employee was considerably lower -- $223 to $398.

The new newspaper counties had one farm for every 32 people; old newspaper counties had one farm for every 66 people, further supporting the notion that the emphasis was shifting from agriculture to industry. Still, those old county farmers were more prosperous than their new county counterparts, averaging $940 in produce sales per farm, in contrast to only $386 for the newcomers. The average value of a farm in an old newspaper county was $4,213; in a new newspaper county it was $2,861.

Old newspaper counties experienced a higher rate of growth.

The new newspaper counties prosperity quotient was .57, compared with 1.19 for old newspaper counties.

Although a surface examination of the averages suggests some interesting differences between new and old newspaper counties, the question remains as to whether these figures are really meaningful. Table 2 also shows the results of a Chi Square analysis of some of the figures, indicating that population, the level of manufacturing activity and data indicative of the wealth of a community are significant in distinguishing between old and new newspaper counties.

SUMMARY: The figures suggest, as would be expected, that population was important to a newspaper, with old newspaper counties offering a larger population base than was found in the new newspaper counties, but the composition of that population appears to have made little difference. The percentage of women in the population as an indicator of stability and, therefore, desirability of the county as a newspaper location, proved to be an insignificant measure. Nor was literacy a significant delimiter for old and new newspaper counties.

However, the relative wealth of a county was important. The old newspaper counties were clearly richer than those where newspapers were recent arrivals.

It was expected that county growth would show up as a significant factor, particularly for the new newspaper counties. Other study by this writer has suggested that growth potential was one of the most important factors in a publisher's decision to

locate in a community. In Washington Territory, where interim territorial censuses allowed shorter-term comparisons, growth rates generally exceeded 10 percent the year previous to the establishment of a newspaper. This growth was found usually to be in anticipation of a particular development, something the author called "event orientation," which included the arrival of the railroad, a mineral strike, or expectation of a government establishment in the community.[18] However, growth statistics in the present study showed no significant differences between old and new counties. This may be the result of using decade intervals. On the frontier growth often came suddenly; the new newspaper towns may have drifted along for seven years or so, then had a big spurt in population leading to the establishment of a newspaper. Thus the 10-year average growth is not impressive even though recent growth might be. It is possible, too, that although the census data do not reveal a county's prospects, event orientation may help explain why the 31 relatively poor counties nevertheless boasted new newspapers: as in Washington Territory, perhaps, the publishers anticipated some event that would bring prosperity. But this is conjecture and a closer, more traditional, county-by-county analysis is needed to determine whether event orientation holds true throughout the frontier.

In any case, several points emerge from the figures. First, even though new newspaper counties were poorer than other counties with newspapers, they were not barren places by the banks of rivers that Boorstin suggests attracted hopeful itinerant printers. Boorstin's cases, however colorful, are generally

unrepresentative of the greater number of frontier newspaper communities. The data suggest that when their newspapers were established, these counties already had, for the most part, solid population bases for their time and place. To be sure, the counties could be expected to grow and the newspaper would undoubtedly do all it could to encourage growth -- Boorstin's basic notion of the booster press is well founded -- but prospective publishers, then as now, tried to minimize their risks by ensuring at least a minimal circulation.[19]

Second, while it is unwise to posit a cause-effect relationship in regard to the greater populations and wealth of old newspaper counties, it is equally unwise to ignore the contributions the newspapers made to growth, and the data could provide the basis for a study of the impact the newspaper had on its community.

A third point worth noting is that more than half of the 165 counties in the territories did not have newspapers. From Toqueville onward, it was commonly said that "there is scarcely a hamlet that has not its newspaper,"[20] but this generality obviously did not apply on the frontier. Clearly, a comparison between counties with and without newspapers is among the possibilities for future study in which census data may prove helpful.

TABLE 1

Averages for

All Counties with Newspapers n=78

Population	5,508
Percent Women	37
Number of Farms	385
Percent Owner-operated	94
Average Farm Value	$3,675
Crop Value per Farm	$720
Manufacturers	16
Sales per Manufacturer	$8,079
Annual Wages per Employee	$328
Per Capita Assessed Value	$281
Total Taxes per County	$29,579

TABLE 2

Averages for Old and New Newspaper Counties*

Variables	Old NP n=47	New NP n=31
Population[a]	6,772	3,592
Percent Women	38	37
Number of Farms	405	356
Percent Farms Owner-Operated	92	97
Average Farm Value[b]	$4,213	$2,861
Value of Crops per Farm[c]	$940	$386
Manufacturers[d]	22	7
Sales Per Manufacturer	$10,243	$4,798
Annual Wages per Employee	$398	$223
Per Capita Assessed Value[e]	$297	$256
Taxes Paid per County	$40,536	$13,143

*Old newspaper counties that have at least one newspaper at least two years old; new newspaper counties have at least one newspaper less than two years old.

[a] $X^2=17.78$ 3 d.f. $p < .001$

[b] $X^2=12.56$ 3 d.f. $p < .01$

[c] $X^2=16.94$ 3 d.f. $p < .001$

[d] $X^2=17.46$ 3 d.f. $p < .001$

[e] $X^2=14.75$ 3 d.f. $p < .01$

NOTES

[1]Daniel J.Boorstin, The Americans: The National Experience (New York, 1965), 124.

[2]Carolyn Stewart Dyer, "The Business History of the Antebellum Wisconsin Newspaper, 1833-1860: A Study in Concentration of Ownership and Diversity of Views," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1978), and "Quantitative Analysis in Journalism History: Some Examples and Advice," Clio (1980).

[3]David Paul Nord, "Working-Class Readers: Using Labor Statistics to Study Newspaper Readership in the Late Nineteenth Century," paper presented to the AEJ History Division, East Lansing, August 1981.

[4]Dyer, Clio, 1; Roy Atwood cited by Dyer.

[5]Barbara Cloud, "Start the Presses: The Birth of Journalism in Washington Territory," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1979), 168.

[6]When Frederick Jackson Turner noted the bureau's comment in the 1890 census report in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"(1893), he established the frontier as a legitimate subject for historians.

[7]Carroll D. Wright, The History and Growth of the United States Census, (Washington, 1900, Johnson Reprint Corp. edition, 1966), 58.

[8]S.N.D. North, "History and Present Condition of the Newspaper and Periodical Press of the United States," Tenth Census, 1880, vol. 8, (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884).

[9]Utah became a state in 1896; Arizona and New Mexico joined the ranks in 1912.

[10]This paper deals with the territories, but future research could determine whether the distinctions presumed did make a meaningful difference.

[11]Cloud, "Start the Presses," 159-160.

[12]More detailed information might be obtained from the individual census returns, but when trying to paint with broad brushstrokes, you don't need a fine detail brush.)

[13]See, for example Galen Rarick, "Subscribers and Non-Subscribers: In What Ways are They Different?", News Research for Better Newspapers, Vol. 6, Washington, D.C., 1971-72; Keith R. Stamm and Lisa Fortini-Campbell, "Community Ties and Newspaper Use," ANPA News Research Report No. 33, Oct. 30, 1981, as well as many other ANPA reports.

[14]Although county figures do not show it, territorial figures reveal that many of the immigrants were from the British Isles. This suggests that the potential readership probably was closer to the 90 percent average than 67 percent and, in fact, corresponded rather well with the census takers' "unable to write" counts.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Roger Lotchin discusses the impact of the arrival of wives and families on early San Francisco in San Francisco, 1846-1856, (New York, 1974), 293-310.

[17]Prosperity is the author's arbitrary measure indicating the relative amount of money circulating in a county and is composed of the average value of crops per farm, plus the average sales per manufacturer, plus average pay per worker, plus per capita assessed valuation, truncated to a decimal.)

[18]Cloud, "Start the Presses," 169.

[19]In Washington Territory, publishers tried to visit a town before making a commitment. Ibid., 180.

[20]Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 1, (New York, 1953 edition), 186. Washington Territory historian Edmond Meany is among those spreading the generality when he said, "By the time a hamlet could boast of a dozen cabins it would enjoy the comforts of a post office, store, and freshly printed newspaper," History of the State of Washington (New York, 1910), 221; as did North in his discussion of the nation's newspapers in the 1880 census report, 65-66.